

It's hip to be square – in your diet, anyway!

As with everything else we buy, there are people who have a vested interest in where we spend our food dollars. You've heard of the food pyramid, you might have even learnt about it at school, and certainly you can picture it, at least vaguely, showing you what you should be eating in greater and lesser amounts to stay healthy – eat more of the stuff at the bottom and less of the stuff at the top and you'll be right. It was a very helpful tool for generations of parents with the best interests of their families at heart.

Did anyone ever mention who the experts behind the food pyramid and the 'ideal' diet are? Would it surprise you to know that it is the United States Department of Agriculture? Is it any accident that some of the most powerful industry groups in the US are the creators of the standard western diet? Not really, and the evidence that the recommendations in the food pyramid are not designed with the best interests of the community in mind is showing up in epidemic levels of heart disease, diabetes, obesity and related issues. There are nutrition experts involved in the creation of the pyramid – but according to the Harvard School of Public Health, 'Selecting the panelists is no easy task, and is subject to intense lobbying from organisations such as the National Dairy Council, United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, Soft Drink Association, American Meat Institute, National Cattleman's Beef Association and Wheat Foods Council'.

The new food pyramid is a real square

In many Asian and European countries diets have traditionally been made up of unprocessed foods, eaten as close to their natural state as possible. Traditional diets are clean and balanced, and lifestyle-related diseases such as obesity, heart disease, diabetes and cancers that afflict 'westerners' have not been experienced at anywhere near the same levels. Sadly though, this is changing as the western diet and fast foods become the global staple.

The secret is to eat foods as close to their natural state as possible – if you are going to eat grains make sure they are unrefined, if you are going to eat meat go organic, and if you are going to cook vegetables, lightly steam them so that you reduce the loss of nutrients through cooking.

Naturopaths use a slightly different food pyramid. In fact, it's a square in which the foods we should be consuming are surrounded by the number one element our bodies need – water.

I'm sure you've heard this before, but our bodies are literally made up of 60 to 70 per cent water. Your muscles are 77 per cent water, your blood is around 83 per cent water and your bones are 22 per cent water. And because they generally have more muscle, men have a higher water content than women. Now does it make sense why everyone keeps telling you to drink more?

Water is fundamental to our body chemistry, among the most important roles it plays are keeping your body and brain hydrated. Your brain is the first place you lose water from when you become dehydrated and this affects your ability to think straight. Water is also essential for helping your body to eliminate wastes, including the acidic wastes released during times of stress.

So how much do you really need? I recommend two litres of filtered water per day and this is just the amount that an active person needs in order to prevent dehydration. Tap water is potentially contaminated with toxic industrial chemicals such as chlorine, as well as nasty bacteria and heavy metals, so yes, filtered is better.

Are we talking about water specifically or just fluids? Although tea, coffee and scotch contain water or ice, the body has to process the contents of the drink before it is able to make use of the water. So water means water or herbal teas, including green tea provided that it is brewed for less than one minute so you get all of the essential antioxidants without a high tannin release. Tannins are nature's waterproofing and preserving agents and they're used to turn animal hide into leather. Drink too much tea, especially the way westerners

drink it – strong and black – and you’ll be drying out your insides.

When I was living in North Queensland I had a client who was a genuine salt of the earth Australian stockman, Akubra hat and all. He was in his sixties and had spent his life mustering and working the land, and more than anything else he loved to ride his horses. When he first came into my clinic he sat down and told me that he was only there because his wife had made him come, and that he wasn’t going to do anything I suggested. At least we knew where we stood! We had an hour, so we thought we might as well chat. He told me about how his body had seized up with arthritis, stiffening to the point that he had to move around and ‘warm up’ for hours before he was able to get on his horse. So not only was he in physical pain, but he was also distressed about not being able to ride like he used to. I asked him some questions about his lifestyle and discovered that he was suffering from a real lack of water in his diet. In fact he never drank water, but he did drink about 15 cups of strong ‘billy’ tea every day. There was no way this man was going to give up his tea, so the alternative was to find a way of balancing out his tea drinking. We made a deal: he could continue to drink as much tea as he wanted, but for every cup of tea, he would drink two cups of water. Just a few days later he called to tell me that he was back on his horse and that the pain from his arthritis was more manageable. He also became the world’s biggest expert on water and would tell everyone he came into contact with how much they should be drinking! Living well isn’t always about depriving yourself of the things you love, just making sure you balance it all out.

Fresh, organic fruits and vegetables

Ideally, you should be eating between three and five times more servings of vegetables than fruit per day. According to Harvard University, the average person needs to eat around nine servings (or four-and-a-half cups) of vegetables and fruits every day – and eating additional servings can reduce your chances of developing heart disease.

Vegetables are typically high in carbohydrates and a rich source of vitamins, minerals, enzymes, carotenoids, fibre and antioxidants. Raw vegetables are preferable to cooked because the cooking process destroys some of the nutritional properties, if you are going to cook go for lightly steaming over boiling or baking.

Don’t get too concerned about which vegetables contain which nutritional elements, just focus on making your meals as colourful as you can and you’ll be getting a good balance because different coloured vegetables contain different nutritional properties.

Like vegetables, fruits consist mainly of carbohydrates but in a more concentrated, simple sugar (high GI) form. They are a good source of some rather exotic and powerful antioxidants, which strengthen the immune system by scavenging free radicals. The general rule with fruits is to consume them either before noon or after exercising when your insulin sensitivity is highest. This helps to replenish your muscle energy stores quickly and use kilojoules effectively by not allowing them to break down and become stored as fats.

Juice bars are the latest thing and although it’s great that people are now consuming much more juice, be aware that not all juices are created equal. The difference between freshly squeezed juices and the canned, bottled or boxed varieties is that fresh juice is alive and packed with good enzymes, whereas virtually all pre-packaged juices are deactivated, acid-forming and ‘dead’ as a result of being pasteurised. Bottled and canned juices are also frequently loaded with sugars and artificial colours and flavours as well as a host of other chemicals, most of which are not listed on the label. One such chemical is brominated oil, which is added to prevent settling and the formation of ‘rings’ around the bottle. Brominated oil is known to cause changes in heart tissue, enlarge the thyroid gland and cause problems with the liver. Take the time to freshly squeeze your own or visit the local juice bar, but don’t let juice replace your intake of fruits, it is important to eat the whole fruit most of the time so that you get the fibre as well.

Quality protein

Commercially available meats are generally very high in saturated fat – sirloin steak, for example, can be up to 72 per cent fat – and often provide little in the way of essential omega-3 fatty acids. Not only that, farmed meat frequently contains things that we really wouldn't like to see at dinner such as pesticides, antibiotics, parasites, salmonella and E.coli. Manufactured meats are just plain scary with rancid and mutagenic by-products from the processing process that just have no place in a human body.

If you want to eat meat, go for organic meat, free from as much human intervention as possible.

When it comes to red meat, my choice is kangaroo, it has the highest percentage of protein and lowest percentage of saturated fat of all red meats and it is the highest known source of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which is found in grass-eating animals. CLA is a 'good' fat that has been shown to possess potential anti-carcinogenic and anti-diabetic properties, in addition to reducing obesity and atherosclerosis (high blood pressure).

Fish is also an excellent source of quality protein and essential fatty acids. Cold-water fish, such as salmon, is rich in omega-3 essential fatty acids, which are the 'good fats' we hear so much about today that have been shown to be especially beneficial in the prevention of heart disease. These days people are aware that seafood can contain heavy metals such as mercury, and this can quite rightly cause concern when it comes to eating seafood. Many of the fish varieties that have picked up mercury contamination also contain high levels of minerals such as selenium and zinc, which are particularly effective in combating the adverse effects of mercury. There are also plenty of varieties of fish that are very low in mercury but high in zinc and selenium, the pick of these are Atlantic salmon and mackerel.

If you're not into eating meat or fish, egg whites are another fantastic source of protein. They are very low in calories and have no cholesterol. Most of the protein in eggs is in the whites while the majority of the fat is in the yolk, so if you are watching your weight, limit your intake of yolks.

Dairy

Commercial cow's milk is pasteurised, homogenised, reinforced with synthetic additives and typically contains residues of hormones, antibiotics and pesticides from the grains fed to the cattle. There are many alternative sources of milk available, including rice milk and soy milk. But read the packet carefully, some rice milks contain loads of added sugar and many soy milks are either soy 'drinks' or taken from genetically modified (GM) soybeans. If you want to have milk, go for low-fat soy (non-GM) or if you prefer rice milk, look for one with no added sugar. My preferred dairy protein comes from organic, soured, plain 'active-culture' milk products such as low-fat yoghurt, cottage cheese, kefir and feta cheese. These are much easier to digest and will provide a balance of protein, carbohydrate and fat.

Lentils and legumes

Vegetarians have thrived for years without consuming animal products. Lentils and legumes are a wonderful source of protein and are low GI. Nuts and seeds are another solid source of protein, minerals and fat-soluble nutrients, but they're also very high in fat (68 to 78 per cent), and although it's good fat, it's still fat. The good oils found in nuts and seeds are easily damaged by heat, light and oxygen so always eat unsalted nuts and seeds, direct from their shells if you can. If you are going to cook with nuts or seeds, add them at the last moment so that the heat doesn't destroy the nutrients.

Carbohydrates

Do you remember at school, we used to make glue out of white flour and water? Remember how it smelled after a few hours and how it set like cement when you used it? Well, that same cement-like action is happening inside your body every time you eat white breads, pasta and rice. And after it has been in there for a while, it becomes foul, sticking to the walls of your bowel and sucking the life out of you. I call it

‘bum glue’.

The germ is where most of the nutrients live, so you should avoid grains that have had the germ removed, like white breads, pastas and rice. Refined and processed grains are acid-forming (high in phosphorous) and when consumed as flour they tend to cause problems in the gut (such as bloating), the brain and in the joint capsules. They are also rich in phytates, which are acids that bind minerals to the intestinal tract causing them to be excreted unused. Have a ‘healthy’ meat and salad sandwich on white bread for lunch every day and the water-soluble nutrients will immediately be leached out of your body.

If you did nothing other than replace white grains for brown in your diet, your basic level of health would increase dramatically. Working out which carbohydrates to eat is easy, just remember to eat unrefined brown grains (brown rice, pasta and breads) and go for low GI.

Essential Fatty Acids

Fats are an essential part of our diet, we need ‘good’ fats such as linoleic acid (omega-6) and alpha-linolenic acid (omega-3). These fatty acids are a critical structural component of our brains, nervous systems and cell membranes. Without them, especially omega-3, we will experience chronic inflammation, water retention (oedema) and loss of tissue elasticity. Good fats also transport fat-soluble nutrients around the body.

One of the best books I have ever read is *Fats That Heal, Fats That Kill* by Udo Erasmus. He explains, in basic terms, the nutritional differences between lifeless, refined, processed oils and cold pressed oils that are full of nutrients. Most of the oils in the supermarket have been heated excessively in processing and are rancid, and margarines are even worse. When vegetable fats are heated excessively they are transformed into trans fatty acids, which are the nastiest of all foods that you can put into your body. In 2003, the US Government advised the creators of the food pyramid to revise it to encourage the consumption of omega-essential fatty acids and the elimination of trans fatty acids from people’s diets on the basis that omega-3 fatty acids may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD), while trans fatty acids may increase the risk of CHD.

Avocado, kangaroo and cold-water fish are all good sources of good fats (try to avoid tinned fish though because it has been exposed to extreme heat during the cooking process, which makes the good fats not so good). I take organic flax or hemp seed and extra virgin olive oils in my diet daily. I add them to salads or protein shakes to make sure I get my necessary quota of essential fatty acids.

So what is a realistic balanced diet? For me I think it is a little bit of everything, eaten as close to nature as possible, and this does not mean eating junk food in the park! It means reducing the amounts of refined and processed foods in your diet and eating more of the healthy, unrefined and unprocessed foods that are close to nature.